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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, the complex nature of transitions into stepfamilies has been the focus of considerable attention. Previous scholars have established developmental tasks for remarriage, stepfamilies, and stepsibling relations. A parallel, but unique, set of developmental stages and tasks for the adjustment to stepgrandparenting occur. These adjustments to stepgrandparenting include: (1) accepting the losses; (2) accepting the adult child's single status; (3) accepting the adult child's entrance into a new relationship; and (4) establishing new relationships within the stepfamily context. These tasks and stages of adjustment to stepgrandparenting imply that the transition to stepgrandparenting is a process rather than an event. This process begins with a loss, continues through adaptation to the adult child's single parent family, and the adjustment to stepgrandparenthood. Results also imply that the transition to stepgrandparenthood is rarely a choice by grandparents. Grandparents can be involved in enhancing adjustment. The most important implication is that the unique developmental stages and qualities of stepfamilies need to be understood by extended family members as well as the stepfamily and the family life professional. (Author/ABL)

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# The Developmental Tasks of Adjustment to Stepgrandparenting

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Running Head: DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF STEPGRANDPARENTING

Abstract

Previous scholars have established developmental tasks for remarriage, stepfamilies, and stepsibling relations. A parallel, but unique, set of developmental stages and tasks for the adjustment to stepgrandparenting are presented. The focus is on the challenges grandparents face as their adult-children enter into stepfamily relationships. Four developmental stages in the adjustment to stepgrandparening are presented: (a) Stage 1: Accepting the Losses, (b) Stage 2: Accepting the Adult-Child's Single Status, (c) Stage 3: Accepting the Adult-Child's Entry into a New Relationship, and (d) Stage 4: Establishing New Relationships within the Stepfamily Context. Specific developmental tasks within each stage are presented. Implications of the stages and developmental tasks are presented as they relate to the impact of stepfamily formtion on relations between grandparents, adult-children, their new spouses and stepgrandchildren.

Developmental Tasks of Adjustment to Stepgrandparenting

Over the past few decades, the complex nature of transitions into stepfamilies has been the focus of considerable attention. The lack of social norms and legal guidelines governing stepfamilies has created an incomplete social institution--the stepfamily (Cherlin, 1978, 1981). In addition, numerous misconceptions about the nature of stepfamilies are found among both stepfamily members and family life professionals (Coleman & Ganong, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1980). Given the lack of clarity and the myths concerning stepfamily roles it is not surprising that members often find themselves trying to accomplish conflicting tasks within the stepfamily (Fast & Cain, 1966).

The transition into stepfamily roles impacts both the immediate stepfamily and their extended family members. Therefore, it is not only the immediate stepfamily that experiences the confusion and complexity of adapting to new roles and responsibilities, but also the extended family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins). For example, the "myth of instant love" (Visher & Visher, 1980) may be apparent when new grandparents feel guilty for not wanting to include new stepgrandchildren in activities with their other grandchildren.

The majority of literature concerning stepfamily adjustment has focused upon the immediate stepfamily, apart from the extended family (e.g., Chilman, 1983; Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1984). When attention has given to the extended family members such as grandparents, the focus has been primarily upon how grandparents deal with the end of their adult-child's previous

marriage (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Duffy, 1982; Spanier & Hanson, 1982) or how the grandparent influences the adjustment of the stepfamily unit (Visher & Visher, 1980; Wald, 1981). There has been little consideration of how grandparents' roles change with the entry of their adult-child into a stepfamily. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by presenting a set of developmental stages and tasks in the adjustment to grandparenting.

Stages of Adjustment to Stepgrandparenthood

Beginning with Duvall's (1957) original stages of family development, scholars have attempted to describe the predictable stages and issues that families encounter over time. According to current versions of the family life cycle, families encounter predictable changes in roles and developmental tasks (Duvall & Miller, 1985) or changes in system qualities and concerns (Carter & McGoldrick, 1982) based upon critical transition periods that emerge from the combinations of developmental changes in the individuals.

In recent years, scholars have made advances in applying the family life cycle concept to remarriage and stepfamilies. McGoldrick and Carter (1982) presented the dislocations of the family life cycle associated with divorce. Developmental tasks or stages have been presented relating to other apsects of stepfamily life including: remarriage (Goetting, 1982; McGoldrick & Carter, 1982; Ransom, Schleisinger, & Derdeyn, 1979), stepfamilies (Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1982; Wald, 1981)), stepsiblings (Rosenberg & Hajal,

1985), the adjustment of children to divorce (Wallerstein, 1983), and single-parent families (Hill, 1986). In the next section, the developmental stages and tasks for the transition to stepgrandparenthood are presented. Specifically, the focus is on the transition to stepgrandparenthood in a situation where the addition of stepgrandchildren results from an adult-child's marriage to a spouse who has children from a previous marriage or relationship.

For the sake of clarity, within the developmental stages and tasks, the term "grandchild" is used to refer to the biological or adopted children of an adult-child prior to the entry into the stepfamily. The term, "adult-child" refers to the parent of the "grandchild" and the daughter or son of the "grandparent". The term "grandparent" refers to the extended family member who is the parent of the "adult-child" and is entering stepgrandparenting roles. The term "stepgrandchild" refers to the child of an adult-child's new spouse (i.e., not the child of an adult-child). The developmental stages and tasks described correspond to the table of developmental stages and tasks (see Table 1).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Stage 1: Accepting the Losses. A unique characteristic of the stepfamily is that it is born of loss (Visher & Visher, 1982). Ransom, Schlesinger, and Derdeyn (1979) suggested that the first developmental task for stepfamily formation is to mourn the losses of the previous family. Likewise, stepgrandparenthood emerges after grandparents experience the loss of their adult-child's former spouse through divorce or death. When the adult-child's marriage ends through the death of a spouse, grandparents also experiences a loss. As the loss is mourned, it is typical for both the adult-child and the grandparents to idealize the lost relationship. Family members may focus upon the positive qualities and minimize the negative qualities of the deceased. Furthermore, the grieving process includes both the actual loss and the loss of an idealized image of the intact family for the adult-child.

On the other hand, when an adult-child's marriage ends in divorce, grandparents may experience either the loss of a desirable relationship with the adult-child's former spouse or relief that the adult-child is no longer in a difficult marriage. In either case, the image of the "life-long happy marriage" for the adult-child is lost. The grandparent may show signs of holding onto the past such as continuing the display pictures of the adult-child's family that include the former spouse. Statements may symbolize such feelings of losses such as, "I miss Dan. He was like my own son." Grief is a natural reaction to loss that needs to be experienced before grandparents are prepared to enter the stepgrandparenting roles.

In another case, grandparents may experience a loss of "what could have been". When the never-married single adult-child marries a person with children, grandparents typically become stepgrandparents with little preparation for the roles. In this situation, contrary to traditional expectations, grandparenting roles do not emerge with biological or adopted grandchildren but with children who have a history that usually includes other grandparents. The vision of entering into grandparental roles through the young adult-child marrying and having biological children must be revised before successful transition into stepgrandparenting roles can occur (Kalish & Visher, 1982).

In addition to mourning the losses, grandparents may fear or actually experience losses in relationships with their biological or adopted grandchildren. The legal rights of grandparents tend to remain unclear in most states (Wilson & DeShane, 1982). Even within intact families the contact of children with their grandparents is typically mediated through the parents (Barranti, 1985; Robertson, 1975). Non-custodial grandparents may fear they will lose their grandchildren. Since the legal rights are ambigious, this fear may be justified. Grandparents whose adult-child is a non-custodial parent often have contact with their grandchildren only when the children visit their non-custodial parent (i.e., the adult-child). After divorce or death, grandparents whose adult-child is a custodial parent often have increased contact with their grandchild, even to the point of assuming greater caretaking and financial responsibilities for a period of time prior to the remarriage (Kalish & Visher, 1982).

Since divorce and remarriage have increased dramatically over the past several decades (Glick & Lin, 1986), grandparents may vary considerably in their views about the meaning and acceptability of divorce and remarriage. For example, grandparents fear or believe that their adult-child's divorce occurred as a result of their own failures as parents (Hyatt & Kaslow, 1985; Kalish & Visher, 1982). In contrast, the grandparents may be relieved that their adult-child is no longer in an undesirable marriage. Therefore, a developmental challenge for grandparents in this stage is to clarify their own values and feelings about divorce and single parenting.

Regardless of the circumstances leading to the aquisition of stepgrandparental roles, change is inevitable. Reorganization in the expectations for the grandparent, the adult-child, the adult-child's former spouse, and the grandchildren must occur in response to the changed family structure.

Stage 2: Accepting the Adult-Child's Single Status. As grandparents have clarified and worked through their feelings about the losses described in Stage 1, they face the challenge of accepting their adult-child's single status. Inherent in the adult-child's adjustement to single-parenting is an increased permeability of family boundaries for the single adult-child. In order for the adult-child to adapt to the changed family situation, it is recognized as important for the adult-child's family to change the boundaries to allow for new friends, child care assistance and others to become important to the family system (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982). Grandparents may have

concerns about how these changing boundaries will influence their relationships with their adult-child and grandchildren. These changes reflect the lack of social norms inherent in the transition of adult-child's family into a single-parent family.

As the adult-child's family goes through the process of adapting to a single-parent family structure, ambiguity in roles is likely to result for a period of time. In the life cycle of the adult-child's family, the family carries on the developmental tasks from the previous family structure, with a different composition of persons to fulfill the tasks and adds a new set of developmental tasks (Wald, 1981). For example, if the adult-child's former spouse previously enacted nurturant roles towards the children, the former spouse may wish to continue those roles. Since the social norms for single-parent families are ambigious, the way that a particular family will attempt to enact the roles (e.g., nurturant) is subject to ambiguity. As an adult-child's family goes through the ambiguity, grandparents face the developmental challenge of accepting abmiguity in roles as a normal part of the adult-child's single-family structure.

Grandparents are faced with the challenge of accepting new roles with their grandchildren. When a custodial adult-child lives near the grandparents (or with the grandparents), it is common for the grandparents to assume greater roles in "parenting" the grandchildren. However, when the adult-child is a non-custodial parent (or has joint custody), amiguity in grandparenting roles may be even greater. The nature of the relationship between the grandchildren and the non-custodial

parent (i.e., the adult-child) may serve to mediate such relationships. Grandparents must seek acceptable ways to maintain relationships with their granchildren.

Another challenge in the transition to stepgrandparenthood is the changing nature of relationships between grandparents and their adult-child's former spouse (assuming the case of divorce). As mentioned earlier, it is not unusual for grandparents to form attachments to their adult-child's former spouse. By virtue of the adult-child's divorce, the relationship between the grandparents and the adult-child's former spouse requires change.

Grandparents vary considerably in how they feel toward their adult-children's former spouses. Regardless of their feelings, the issue arises about the contact of grandchildren with the adult-child's former spouse (i.e., their father or mother). When the former spouse has custody or joint custody of the grandchildren, a new relationship may be necessary in order to maintain contact with the grandchildren. Grandparents are also faced with the challenge of balancing any negative feelings they may have toward their adult-child's former spouse with a recognition of the importance of the relationship between the grandchildren and their parent (i.e., the adult-child's former spouse). Whether positive, negative, or mixed feelings toward the adult-child's former spouse exist for the grandparent, supporting the contact of grandchildren with the adult-child's former spouse becomes a developmental challenge.

As an adult-child becomes more adjusted to a single-parent lifestyle, grandparents face the developmetal task of accepting their adult-child's new social network. A divorced or widowed adult-child is likely to experience a transition from couples social world into a that of the formerly-married. For grandparents who are accustomed to their adult-child in the context of the former marital relationship, reevaluation of their own perceptions and values about the social network of their adult-child may be necessary. Particularly challenging to grandparents is when the adult-child begins dating on a regular basis. The development of a new relationship has the potential to impact grandparents relationships with their grandchildren.

Stage 3: Accepting the Adult-Child's Entrance into a New Relationship. Once again, grandparents face the task of adjusting to a redefinition of their adult-child's family boundaries as the adult-child enters a new dating relationship with the potenial for remarriage. After having adapted to a number of transitions in the adult-child's family, grandparents are likely to have fears concerning the impact of a new relationship on all individuals involved. The ambiguity experienced as the adult-child's former marriage ended, as the single-parent family adjusted, and as the adult-child enters a new relationship accumulates for many grandparents. For example, the adult-child may be ready to move on to another stage of family development just as the grandparent has become accustomed to the current stage.

Establishing open communication with the person whom the adult-child has developed a relationship is necessary to avoid the potential for pseudomutuality. Pseudomutuality results as individuals outwardly appear to accept the new relationship while interally experiencing anger, frustration, or resentment. If the grandparents have established new relationships with their adult-child's former spouse and their grandchildren, they are likely to be more ready to establish open communication in the new relationship.

Grandparents may also serve as valuable resources for their grandchildren when their adult-child goes through the process of developing a new relationship (Barranti, 1985). By helping the grandchildren placing the adult-child's former family into an historical perspective grandparents can help their grandchildren have a sense of their roots that is less competitive with the adult-child's new relationship. By providing a support system for grandchildren who fear their position in the new relationship or experience loyality conflicts, grandparents meet the challenge of providing support for and solidfiying their relationships with their grandchildren.

The next set of developmental challenges that grandparents face relate to the potential of a new family system for the adult-child. Grandparents face the task of preparing to accept new fmaily members in the adult-child's family system, both a new spouse and stepgrandchildren. Acknowledgemnt of the existence of potential stepchildren and understanding their relationship with the adult-child's potential spouse becomes important.

In addition, grandparents are likely to begin considering how the potential new stepfamily members may be integrated into the extended family. The extended family becomes increasingly complex as current grandchildren and new stepgrandchildren, along with their other extended family members enter kin network. Grandparents may experience confusion about how the changes will impact their lives adn relationships with their grandchildren.

Stage 4: Establishing New Relationships Within The Stepfamily Context. A developmental challenge faced by grandparents after their adult-child enters a stepfamily relationship is the redefinition family boundaries to include the adult-child's new spouse and stepgrandchildren. The results of one study of remarried women indicated that remarried women and their children tend to be isolated from the extended family of their former spouse and tend to integrate into the kin network of the present husband and stepfather (Anspach, 1976). Therefore, it may be expected that the nature of stepgrandparenting roles may be somewhat different depending whether an adult-son or adult-daughter enters a stepfamily. Similar to the variations that occur in the enactment of grandparenting roles (Kivnick, 1982; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Robertson, 1977), variations the enactment of stepgrandparenting roles may be expected to occur. In any case, grandparents face the challenges of redefining the family boundaries to accomodate the new members of both the stepfamily and other extended family systems.

The entrance into stepgrandparenting roles is inherently ambiguous due to the lack of social norms and the predominance of

misconceptions about stepfamily relations. Due to the lack of social norms, individual families must clarify the expectations for grandparenting and stepgrandparenting roles. When an adult-child with grandchildren marries a new spouse who has children (i.e., stepgrandchildren), grandparents are faced with the challenges of balancing and defining both grandparenting and stepgrandparenting roles. Grandparents may feel "competition" for the attention of their biological or adopted grandchildren from the adult-child's new in-laws. This may be particualrly threatening when grandparents have assumed semi-parental roles. Having adapted to the role changes as their adult-child became a single parent, the grandparents now experience another set of changing role expectations (Kalish & Visher, 1982). Grandparents may also have concerns about how the additional grandparents will impact their relationships with their biological or adopted grandchildren. At the same time grandparents face changes in their relationships with their biological or adopted grandchildren, they face unclear expectations for stepgrandparenthood. Fears may emerge that strengthening the "new" family means a breaking of ties with the "old" family. As the stepfamily and grandparents begin to learn more about the differences betwen the traditional nuclear family and stepfamilies, progress can be made toward clarifying stepgrandparental role expectations.

Understanding the legal relationship with stepgrandchildren can be challenging, since the legal obligations and rights of grandparents are somewhat unclear (Wilson & Deshane, 1982). In

general, grandparents cannot safely assume that psychological bonding will serve as a basis for legal decisions. In cases where the adult-child's new spouse adopts the adult-child's children, the legal relationship becomes more clearly established. To more fully understand their legal relationship to stepgrandchildren, grandparents may wish to seek the advice of an attorney in their state.

A related developmental tasks is to establish terminology for referring to the stepfamily and extended stepfamily members. Grandparents are faced with the challenge of determining terms to use when describing the complex family structure. The terminology can become quite cumbersome. Since family life professionals have difficulty in establishing a consistent set of terminology, it may be expected that grandparents may face the same difficulty. At this point, the family is faced with negotiating an acceptable set of terminology.

Another developmental task is for grandparents is to provide the opportunity to develop bonds with the adult-child's new spouse and the stepgrandchildren. Grandparents do not make the choice to enter stepgrandparenting roles or of their new stepgrandchildren (Kalish & Visher, 1982). The choice is made by the adult-child and his or her new spouse. Since grandparents enters these roles without making a conscious choice (or even when they oppose the choice), stepfamily members and grandparents must create opportunities for bonding to occur. Spending time together in enjoyable activities is one way to begin the bonding. This may be done gradually as the stepfamily members become more

aware of the need to establish relationships in stepfamilies. Since there usually is little, if any, shared background between grandparents and their stepgrandchildren integration is difficult until the backgrounds are shared. Grandparents and stepgrandchildren need to share previous experiences and memories (e.g., looking through family pictures, sharing memoribilia) to allow for a knowledge and understanding of each other. Generally, the increase in self-disclosure may be expected to yield a greater mutual understanding that opens the possibilities for bonding to occur.

## Implications of the Developmental Stages

There are several implications of the developmental tasks and stages of adjustment to stepgrandparenting. First, the transition to stepgrandparenthood is a process rather than an event. That process begins with a loss. The loss may be of an adult-child's former spouse through death or divorce. It may be a loss of the fantasy of a lifelong happy marriage for the adult-child. Thus, grieving the loss of the past or dreams that will not be fulfilled is the first step in the transition to stepgrandparenthood. The next part of the process is usally adaptation to the adult-child's single-parent family. Next, the grandparent adjusts to the entrance of an adult-child into a new relationship. These changes all impact grandparents and their family roles. After adapting to these changes, grandparents find themselves faced with a new set of transitions with the adjustment to stepgrandparenthood.

A second implication is that the transition to stepgrandparenthood is rarely a choice by grandparents. Thus, successful adaptation to stepgrandparenting roles requires an acceptance of the choices made by an adult-child. Issues in the grandparent/adult-child relationship may need to be dealt with before the adjustment to stepgrandparenting may be accomplished.

Third, although grandparents do not make the initial choice about entering stepgrandparenting roles they can be involved in enhancing adjustment. As a stepfamily negotiates and establishes new rules, roles, and responsibilities, these decisions impact or can be impacted by the grandparents. For exmaple, a stepfamily decision to initiate a new holiday ritual may confict with previously established family rituals. Since grandchildren may be part of three or more extended family systems (i.e., including maternal grandparents, paternal grandparents, and stepgrandparents), decisions regarding activities that normally include the extended family influence grandparents. Grandparents may vary in their adaptability to the desires of the stepfamily.

Fourth, perhaps the most important implication is that the unique developmental stages and qualities of stepfamilies need to be understood by extended family members as well as the stepfamily and the family life professional. Educating grandparents about normative stepfamily development and the relinquishment of commonly held myths about stepfamilies can play a powerful role in the adjustment of grandparents to stepgrandparenting roles. Further, educating adult-children

about the transitions into stepgrandparenting roles holds some potential for easing the transition.

Finally, the developmental stages and tasks of adjustment to stepgrandparenting have been divided into specific time frames. In reality, many of the tasks in the several stages may be occuring simultaneously. Others may be occuring earlier or later than presented in the model. The stages of adjustment to stepgrandparenting were developed as a general model and variations are expected in specific families. The primary value in the model in the description and understanding of the process through which grandparents progress and the issues they face during the transition to stepgrandparenting. As family life educators continue to work with grandparents who are experiencing the transiton to stepgrandparenting roles, the model may be refined.

## Summary and Conclusion

This suggested approach of the developmental stages and tasks in the adjustment to stepgrandparenting has been developed to provide stepfamily members, grandparents, and professionals with a model for understanding the transition. The model was developed through an integration and refinement of literature on grandparenting and stepfamily adjustement. Additional research is necessary to more fully understand the issues and developmental concerns of stepgrandparenthood.

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Table 1
The Developmental Tasks of Adjustment to Stepgrandparenting

STAGE 1: ACCEPTING THE LOSSES

Developmental Tasks:

-Grieving and mourning the loss
-Letting go of the fantasy of "a lifelong happy marriage" between the adult-child and the adult-child's former spouse
-Clarifying feelings about divorce and single parenting
-Dealing with one's own feelings of anger, resentment, sadness, or failure
-Accpeting fears about changing relationships with grandchildren

STAGE 2: ACCEPTING THE ADULT-CHILD'S SINGLE STATUS

Developmental Tasks:

-Adjusting to increased permeability of family boundaries
-Increasing contact with and support for adult-child without resuming parental roles
-Accepting reorganization of the adult-child's family
-Acknowledging the ambiguity in family roles
-Accepting the adult-child's new social network
-Supporting the contact of grandchildren with the adult-child's former spouse
-Establishing new relationship with the adult-child's former spouse
-Accepting new roles with grandchildren, generally more parental roles (when the adult-child is the custodial parent)
-Accepting amiguity in grandparenting roles and seeking acceptable ways to maintain relationships with grandchildren (when adult-child is non-custodial parent)

STAGE 3: ACCEPTING THE ADULT-CHILD'S ENTRANCE INTO A NEW RELATIONSHIP

Developmental Tasks:

-Adjusting to redefinition of adult-child's family boundaries
-Acknowledging the existence of potential stepchildren and understanding their relationship with adult-child's potential spouse
-Acknowledge fears concerning the impact of a new relationship on all individuals involved
-Preparing to accept the potential of new family members in the adult-child's life
-Considering how potential new family members can be integrated into the extended family
-Establishing open communication in new relationships to avoid pseudomutuality
-Placing the adult-child's former family into an historical perspective that allows grandchildren to have a sense of their roots and yet does not interfere with acceptance of the new relationship
-Providing a support system for grandchildren who fear their position in the new relationship or experience loyalty conflicts

STAGE 4: ESTABLISHING NEW RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE STEPFAMILY CONTEXT

Developmental Tasks: -

-Redefining family boudaries to include adult-child's new spouse and children
-Clarifying expectations for grandparenting and stepgrandparenting roles
-Restructuring family subsystems to accommodate expanded extended family systems
-Understand differences in legal relationship with grandchildren and stepgrandchildren
-Establishing terminology to use when referring to persons in the complex stepfamily relationships
-Providing opportunities for developing bonds with adult-child's new spouse and the stepgrandchildren
-Developing realistic expectations for stepfamily living based upon an understanding of the uniqueness of stepfamily structures
-Sharing family backgrounds and experiences with the adult-child's new spouse and the stepgrandchildren to enhance stepfamily integration